

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

May 10, 2015

Confirmation Sunday
Sixth Sunday after Easter/Ascension

Luke 24: 44-53

Mother's Day

Don't Let Go

This Thursday the church celebrates the Ascension of Jesus. It's an important day and an important thing - that Jesus went back to Heaven. Since Easter, he's been walking around with his disciples in his resurrected body - teaching them more about who he is and his relationship to his Father...our heavenly Father; and encouraging them as to what to do in this new chapter of their lives.

But he can't stick around forever - and he didn't, or he'd still be around (and we know that's not the case!). So today we hear about how Jesus left the earth to return to Heaven. It's an odd occurrence.... And an interesting reading for Confirmation Sunday, when we celebrate with the eight young people who will profess their faith and formally join this church in a few minutes.

So let's consider - or reconsider - an Ascension Story, as told by Abba Sayah, and ancient mystic of the early church, for Confirmation Sunday:

As the Bible tells us, after forty days of resurrection appearances, Jesus knew it was time to leave his disciples - his mother, his brothers and sisters, all his companions in the Way. It was hard to say goodbye, but he knew that the time had come. After all, he was the Truth and we humans can only take so much of that.

So Jesus called them all together on the mountain top, to say his good-byes. It was a tearful moment. Mary was crying. John was crying. Jesus was crying. Even Peter, the immovable rock, was reaching for his handkerchief.

They knew that Jesus had said he would always be with them. But they also knew it wasn't going to be the same. There would be no more breakfasts by the seashore, no more late night discussions around the campfire, no more unexpected jugs of wine...and so they wept.

Jesus was sad too, but he was glad to be returning to his Father, and he knew it was all part of the plan. And so he began to ascend.

As Abba Sayah told the story, as Jesus began to rise, slowly and gracefully into the air, John just couldn't bear it. He grabbed hold of Jesus' right leg, and refused to let go.

"John?" said Jesus "What are you doing?"
And John shouted back, "If you won't stay with us, then I'm coming too."

Jesus calmly continued to rise, hoping that John would let go. But he didn't. And then, to make matters worse, Mary suddenly jumped up and grabbed hold of Jesus' other leg. "I'm coming too," she shouted.

By now, Jesus' big exit had obviously been ruined, so he looked up into heaven, and called out: "Okay, Father... what do I do now?"

And a voice came out of the clouds, deep and loud like the rumbling of thunder in the distance.

"Ascend!" the voice said.

"Ascend?" Jesus asked

"Ascend!" the voice replied.

So Jesus continued to rise through the air, with John and Mary holding on until they too were lifted off the ground. But the other disciples couldn't bear to be left behind either, so they too jumped on board...and within moments there was this pyramid of people hanging in the middle of the sky. Jesus at the top. John and Mary next. The other apostles hanging on below. Quite a sight, if anyone had been watching...

And then - what was this? Suddenly all kinds of people were appearing out of nowhere...friends and neighbors from around Galilee, people who'd heard Jesus' stories, people whom he had healed, people who just knew that he was something special...Young and old - men, women, children, Jews and Gentiles...a huge crowd - and they too refused to be left behind...So, they made a grab for the last pair of ankles and hung on for dear life.

Here, there and everywhere, there was quite a kerfuffle - people squealing "Wait for me" - then startled yelps as they felt themselves seized by the ankle - and above it all the voice of God calling out, "Ascend!"

But all of a sudden, from the bottom of the pyramid, there came the voice of a small child. "Wait!" he shrilled, "I've lost my dog! Wait for me."

"I can't wait," Jesus called back, "I don't know how this thing works."

But the little boy wasn't going to be left behind, and he was determined his dog was coming with him. So, still holding on with one hand, he grabbed hold of a tree with the other, and held on with all his might.

For a moment, the whole pyramid stopped dead in the air - Jesus pulling upwards, and the little boy holding on to the tree, scanning the horizon for his lost dog. But Jesus couldn't stop. The ascension had begun, and God was pulling him back up to heaven.

At first it looked as if the tree would uproot itself. But then the tree held on, and it started to pull the ground up with it. Sort of like when you pull a rug up in the middle, the soil itself started moving up into the sky. And hundreds of miles away, where the soil met the oceans, the oceans held on. And where the oceans met the shores, the shores held on. All of it held on, like there was no tomorrow.

And Jesus DID ascend to heaven, He went back to his natural habitat, living permanently in the presence of God's endless love and care and wholeness and laughter. But, as Abba Sayah tells it, he pulled all of creation – everything that ever was or is or ever will be – he pulled it all up into heaven with him.

Today – Confirmation Sunday – 1,982 years later, we're still grabbing on to the legs of those who have gone before us. Maybe you grabbed on to a grandparent, or a Sunday School teacher, or a youth advisor, or a parent, or a mentor, or a pastor, or a friend.... Maybe someone is reaching out to grab on to your leg.

There's a sense in which we can think about the Ascension as "Christmas backwards." At Christmas, we focus on Jesus coming to earth to transform us with the presence of God. At the Ascension, we focus instead on Jesus taking earth back with him into heaven...

Whichever way you look at it, the work of Jesus was to transform us and the world we live in. Heaven meets earth; earth is drawn into heaven.

So whatever you do – don't let go! Don't let go!

Amen.